

Algal blooms tough on fishing industry

By Thomas Schmeltz

Imagine a \$1.1 billion industry completely wiped out. The effects on a local economy could be catastrophic with a business so large being destroyed.

The sports fishing industry on Lake Erie could be heading that direction if recent trends continue.

The lake's fishing business, worth \$1.1 billion and employing more than 10,000 people, has seen better days, said [Paul Pacholski](#), president of the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association.

The reason? Blue-green algae.

The algae, harmful to humans and fish, is making perch fishing in Lake Erie more difficult and creating a negative stereotype, driving the public away.

"They read the outdoor magazines and the outdoor publications, and all they're seeing is the toxic algae and stuff like that," said Adam Welch, captain of [Fishin' Edition Charters](#), about recreational fishers.



Adam Welch takes people fishing out in Lake Erie through his fishing charter Fishin' Edition Charters. Photo by Hannah Hilyard.

Welch added that he has lost a substantial amount of business since 2010 and 2011, [when the algae blooms were at their worst](#).

"Without question there are less fishermen," said Pacholski, who has been in the fishing industry for 31 years. "I actually moved my boat. The guys like Adam who stay here, they have to fight the battle with the algae and it's a pretty known fact, if there's a good algae scum you might as well keep on going. It doesn't matter what your fish finder says because you won't find perch."

No perch means less fishing trips. And less fishing trips means less money.

The algae problem is at its worst in the late summer and fall months due to the sunlight fueling its growth.

The blue-green algae are a cyanobacteria, Pacholski said. "Cyanobacteria is a bacteria that has chlorophyll in it that can transfer the energy from the sun into a food source," said Pacholski, who has been hired by Wayne State University, Heidelberg University, The Ohio State University and University of Toledo to help study these algae problems.

Pacholski is also on the [Lake Erie Caucus](#), serving on the advice staff for Senate and Congress.

[Watch the full interview with Pacholski here.](#)

Lake Erie, known for its [perch](#) and [walleye](#) fishing, still sees good business in the spring.

Welch's charter hosts a group from Wisconsin three times a year during the spring months.

Gary Ruby, one of the Wisconsin residents on the trip, said the algae are becoming a big problem in his home state as well.

"It's a big problem. The stench gets on your clothes, and then the algae washes up on the shore," Ruby said.

High phosphorus levels help to create the blue-green algae, which results in harsh [fishing conditions](#).

The high phosphorus levels come from the Maumee River, which feeds into Lake Erie just miles from [Meinke Marina](#) in Oregon, Ohio, where Pacholski's and Welch's charters are docked.

Blue-green algae, which feeds off of phosphorus, is also called microcystis algae. The microcystis can produce a toxin called microcystin, which is known to be harmful to the liver, making it unsafe to swim in.

"The biggest thing is water quality. It's not safe to recreate in when the microcystin levels get really high," Pacholski said. "You're not safe to water ski, jet ski, boating with an open boat where the spray is hitting you in the face, which is fun when it's hot in the summer time. Even dogs and pets that lap water out of the lake, they can get sick."

With the city of Toledo's water intake system just off the shore of Lake Erie, these bacteria and algae are becoming not only a problem for a \$1.1 billion industry, but a problem for the entire area.

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“It’s not just a concern to us fisherman, it’s a concern to everybody that drinks water,” said Pacholski.

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